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***published in***

Ethnic and Racial Studies  
1999

***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1080/014198700329114](https://doi.org/10.1080/014198700329114)

***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

***citation for published version (APA)***

Bax, M. M. G. (1999). Warlords, Priests, and the Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia Hercegovina. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(4). <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198700329114>

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# Warlords, priests and the politics of ethnic cleansing: a case-study from rural Bosnia Hercegovina

Mart Bax

## Abstract

There is a tendency among social scientists and others to interpret the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia Hercegovina as the result of a political policy carefully orchestrated from above and systematically carried out. Whatever eruptions of war violence might deviate from this interpretation are generally viewed as primitive balkanism, pointless acts, banditism or mental aberrations. Terms of this kind reflect an uncritical acceptance of a central or national leader perspective, dismissing as deviant everything that fails to go according to plan, and denying the significance of specific local and regional circumstances or failing at any rate to problematize and examine them. This article describes a process the final result of which can be seen as the ethnic homogenization of a region, but only part of its dynamics can be attributed to a policy implemented from above. Rather, its course can largely be traced back to local vendettas and a long-standing conflict between Franciscan friars and diocesan priests. The case illustrates that a systematic study "from below" is crucial to a better understanding of the dynamics and the developmental logic of the processes of ethnic cleansing. The article concludes with some theoretical thoughts which fit into the current debate on civilizing and decivilizing processes.

**Keywords:** Bosnia Hercegovina; war; violence; ethnic cleansing; decivilization; Franciscans.

## Introduction

In the spring of 1992, warfare had ravaged southwestern Bosnia Hercegovina like a tornado. In no time, units of the Croat army and Bosnian Croat militias had purged the region from Serbs. Then they proceeded to the northeast.<sup>1</sup> The warfare did not fail to affect Medjugorje, the internationally renowned pilgrimage centre where Mary, Mother of God, was said to have delivered her messages of peace virtually daily to several seers ever since 1981. During the eclipse of the state power, two local

Croat clans had literally made each other's lives impossible. They found themselves embroiled in an all-out massacre, which was abruptly terminated by the intervention of a passing Croatian army unit. What was left of one of the clans fled the area. Since then, they have been continuing their 'war' from a Roman Catholic refugee shelter in southern Germany (Bax 1995).

However, peace seemed to have returned to Medjugorje and the vicinity in the early summer of that year. Pilgrims from far and wide were once again coming to the town. Their primary aim was to attend as many Masses as possible at the large parish church. In addition, virtually all of them wanted to pay a few visits to the young seers and thus come into direct contact with the 'special mercy of God'. The blessed ones, as the seers were referred to by the pilgrims, lived with their families in modernized farmhouses, where they provided a kind of mini-services for the pilgrims in special reception rooms. The Franciscan priests entrusted with the spiritual care of the parish and responsible for this Marian devotion had an ambivalent attitude to these mini-services. What was done there was not always fully in keeping with Church guidelines. But since they had long been involved in a conflict with the Vatican and the local Bishop, who wanted to oust the Franciscans as proprietors and administrators of the parishes in the region, they could not afford to take on these extra problems. It was true though that for the Franciscans in the region, the devotion could serve as a powerful weapon against the advancing bishopric and as an ample source of income.<sup>2</sup>

Early in June of that year Marijana, the oldest and most widely attended of the seers, was once again at the gate of her parents' home almost every day. To the left and right, flew two flags: one depicting the Mother of God, the other Croatia's national emblem – the red and white chequerboard. With a friendly smile, Marijana would welcome the guests, as the pilgrims are called in Medjugorje. As soon as a group of forty to sixty of them had gathered together, she would lead them to the reception room, where the Virgin Mary pronounced her daily messages of peace to humanity.

Across the street from where Marijana lived, a narrow path led downhill. Behind the large mulberry trees, there were a few houses on either side of the path. Since it came to a dead-end and the doors of the houses were always closed and their windows shuttered, there was no reason for pilgrims to go that way. People always arrived by motorized transport: civilians in expensive limousines, charity workers in trucks of their society and men wearing camouflage in military vehicles without licence plates. Jozo Barbarić – leader of the local division of Territorial Defence, the national defence organization founded by Tito of which all adult men and women were members – used to live in one of these houses. No one had seen any trace of Jozo since Medjugorje's 'little war', and at this time Zdravko Primorac lived there with his relatives and friends. Zdravko, a

native of Medjugorje, who once fled to Australia, where he became a successful businessman, had since become quite a soldier in the war in Croatia.<sup>3</sup> When the tension rose in Bosnia, Zdravko seems to have devoted his energy in arming the Croat population of the region. After the region was 'purified' of Serbs, he formally left the army and withdrew to one of the hamlets of Medjugorje. Not that he ever stopped being active on the warfront. He still organized weapon supplies, owned a few small ammunition factories in the region and had a number of military vehicles at his disposal. The people in Medjugorje said he had his own army and called him *Kapetan* Zdravko. 'KZ,' they said, 'does lots of good acts for the people of the region.'

Outsiders would think the two worlds with less than a hundred metres dividing them were totally different and separate. In one house there was a world of peace, unity and tolerance propagated by Mary, the Mother of God, by way of the Croat Catholic seers and led by the local Catholic priests, the Franciscan friars. In another house there was a world of absolute intolerance, cruel and heinous violence, genocide and 'ethnic cleansing'. However, as will be described in detail below, these two worlds of 'faith' and 'violence' are closely linked. The people who lived in *Kapetan* Zdravko's hamlet and the people involved in the Marian devotion were part of the same age-old and tightly-knit regional network of Catholic Croat religious nationalists and local violence formations. This network was largely responsible for the second wave of warfare in southwestern Hercegovina, when Muslim communities were the main targets of ethnic cleansing. This part of the total war process in Bosnia Hercegovina took place within a year and a half, that is, from July 1992 to March 1994.

The following pages constitute an in-depth contribution to the ethnography of the war in Bosnia Hercegovina. The description illustrates among other things the relevance of a more systematic inquiry into its local historical roots, for only then is it possible to comprehend the so-called 'absurdities' and 'incongruities' and transcend the dichotomy prevalent in the public debate on the cause of the war, namely, a spontaneous explosion of old tribal disputes versus mass destruction carefully prepared and planned and carried out from above. The article ends with a brief discourse of a more general nature about decivilizing and identification and about the civilizing of religious regimes.

## **Old resentment and new opportunities**

### *Gradiška, tormentor and guinea pig*

In the extremely hot summer of 1992 the northern part of Gradiška was ravaged and made totally desolate. Until recently Gradiška, a village with a population of about three hundred in a valley on the edge of the Brotnjo Plateau, had consisted of two sections. The Defterović, said to

be Muslims of Croat descent, lived on one side of the road, and the Pavlovići, who are related to the clan of the same name in Medjugorje, lived and still live on the other side.

The two groups never got along that well. The Defterovči were the older and larger group, and viewed the Pavlovići as foreign invaders. After World War II, upon the insistence of the authorities, land was offered to these homeless relatives of 'Croat fascists', or so it is said, who came and settled there. The authorities, who were Serbs, did not expect these people to be able to last it out for long, and believed that they would soon emigrate to join relatives elsewhere in Europe. But the Pavlovići stayed where they were. As a minority group, they experienced a great deal of harassment. And when they began to build their own church, with the help of the Franciscans from the nearby monastery in Hum, a period of regular obstruction began.<sup>4</sup> Time and again, as soon as they had part of the church finished, the Defterovči did their best to destroy it. The supply of water, an extremely valuable resource in this dry region, was repeatedly blocked. The Pavlovići had their own men standing guard, and as a result of skirmishes with their tormentors, several Pavlovići were apprehended and held prisoner in the nearby town of Čapljina. Much to the irritation of the Franciscan priests, who wanted to build up a new parish there, the church could never be completed.

The expansion of the tourist industry in Medjugorje also provided the Pavlovići of Gradiška with new opportunities. Thanks, in part, to the return of a number of emigrants, their community grew. The Defterovči, who wanted to take advantage of the new opportunities as well, were systematically prohibited from entering the devotional centre. Their resentment grew, and they regularly engaged in acts of sabotage, with the taxis of the Pavlovići and the Primoraci in Medjugorje as their main targets. The first wave of warfare greatly accelerated and intensified this whole process of harassment and counter-harassment. And when in 1992 the Pavlovići from Gradiška took temporary refuge in Medjugorje, their little church was burnt to the ground and a number of their homes were destroyed. The desire for revenge was not only rampant among the Pavlovići, but the Franciscans from Hum were also enraged after the manhandling of two of their fellow priests who were working in Gradiška.

After his active period in the war in Croatia, *Kapetan* Zdravko had turned to manufacturing ammunition and was said to be earning a fortune. He was also experimenting with new weaponry: land mines filled with metal pellets were his first specialty in the region. They were followed by an even more horrific weapon, a grenade filled with metal pellets to be fired from the shoulder. In an empty yard that belonged to the Franciscans of Medjugorje behind the recently completed Mary Chapel<sup>5</sup> in the hamlet of Bijakovič, Zdravko and some men who lived in

the neighbourhood, and 'friends' from elsewhere in the region, had started to practise using the murderous weapon they dubbed a *minobacač* (rocket launcher). Once stories about how it worked had spread throughout the region, these men adopted the same name themselves. Zdravko had made every effort to get the fervent Hercegovinian nationalist President of the newly founded Republic of Herceg-Bosna interested in his merchandise.<sup>6</sup> However, to prevent international repercussions, the army command, consisting of officers from Croatia, had advised him not to purchase these weapons.

It is possible that Zdravko managed to interest the revenge-minded Pavlovići from Gradiška in his new armaments, because early in August the Rocketeers from Medjugorje, that is, *Kapetan* Zdravko, men from the Pavlovići clan from both of the villages, and some 'friends', gave Gradiška and the immediate vicinity 'a thorough cleansing' (*rasčistiti teren*). Almost a third of the Defterovči were savagely slaughtered, and the rest of them fled to villages where they had friends and relatives to await their revenge.

A few days later the young priests Jozo and Tomislav – who had formerly been in charge of building up the parish of Gradiška, but had been working in Medjugorje ever since the church there had been destroyed – held a service in the Mary Chapel in Bijakovič. Zdravko and his men allegedly attended the service. As always, gratitude was expressed to the Mother of God for her special grace and protection of the community.

### *Lakšič and the monastic treasures of Hum*

Lakšič is about twenty kilometres from Medjugorje on the east shore of the Neretva River. The village is of strategic importance because it links the Medjugorje region to the large road from Mostar to the coast. Before the most recent war, the population consisted of Serbs and a minority of Muslims. In World War II, the Muslims had fought on the side of the Serb Partisans, which now made them the arch enemies of the Croats in the region, who had been members of the fascist Ustaša state at the time.<sup>7</sup> During the first wave of warfare early in 1992, the Croat army thundering past had 'purified' the village of Serbs but, much to the dissatisfaction of the people of Medjugorje, left the small Muslim population unharmed.

This was one of the reasons why *Kapetan* Zdravko and his men had Lakšič on their list of accounts to be settled, as it were. But there were other reasons too. For the Rocketeers of Medjugorje, control over this strategic spot was instrumental in their acquiring the petrol they needed. With his fleet of military vehicles taken as spoils from a former barracks of the federal Yugoslav army in Čapljina, Zdravko's militia was probably the strongest in the region, yet also one of the most vulnerable. Since the Defterovči, who had fled Gradiška, were now said to be housed in the

vacant Serb homes and a joint act of retaliation on their part against Medjugorje seemed not to be improbable, it was important to move quickly. Lakšič also had negative connotations for the Franciscans of the region. Various of their fellow priests from the same monastery in Hum had been killed there by Partisans in World War II having first been forced to accompany a convoy transporting the spoils plundered from their monastery to the Serbian Orthodox monastic complex in Lakšič. They had never been legally able to get their possessions back, but now there was finally a chance for them to reclaim what they felt was rightfully theirs.

Around the middle of October there was a short battle at Lakšič. The village was attacked from two sides. Zdravko and his men crossed the bridge over the Neretva River, and met with little resistance from the armed villagers. Then Zdravko joined a group of soldiers led by a friend of his from the vicinity of Hum who had attacked from the other side. 'Within a few hours, the village was cleansed,' one of my informants told me. The Serbian Orthodox monastery had been carefully spared out of pious respect for the treasures stolen in the past from Hum. The same informant told me that *Kapetan* Zdravko had arranged for an escort to bring the monastic treasures back to Hum, after which they all had a festive meal together there.

The following spring, I noticed that a few Franciscans had started using the Serbian Orthodox chapel in Lakšič. They were holding services for a group of Croat refugees who had moved into the annexes, which were largely still intact. On an improvised partition behind the altar, illustrations of a few biblical allegories were flanked by various sized versions of the age-old Croat coat of arms, the red and white chequerboard.

### *The wine merchants of Vrata*

The Brotnjo Plateau, which is where Medjugorje is situated, ends in a small elevation. For centuries, it was a strategic passageway (*vrata*) between two relatively fertile areas. Up until recently, this high point was the site of some three dozen lovely white houses and a small mosque. But late in 1992 the entire population of Vrata was slaughtered and the mosque blown up. In March 1994 a new Roman Catholic church was built on the spot. The project was initiated by the Franciscans of Hum and largely funded by the self-proclaimed government of Herceg-Bosna.<sup>8</sup> A new Catholic community of Croats who fled from East Bosnia now flourishes there.

The Hamzići, a prominent Muslim clan of wine merchants, had been living at this spot for many, many years. The primarily Croat inhabitants of the region thought them 'strange' (*strane*) because they drank alcohol and ate pork. According to the people who lived in the area, the Hamzići regularly held luxurious outdoor festivities –roasting pigs and sheep over

an open fire, and devouring them with numerous friends who came from far and wide. But the Hamzići were also despised.

After World War II, when the Serb Partisans took over the administration in the region, the Hamzići had acquired various privileges, such as the monopoly for the sale of grapes and the production of wine. Clashes regularly broke out between the Croat farmers from the region – who wanted to produce and sell their wine themselves – and the new monopoly holders and their agents. And after the mid-seventies there was civic unrest as a result of the state helping the Hamzići build a gigantic wine factory and plant vast vineyards. All this meant that the Croat farmers, who had already lost much of their income, were now about to lose the rest as well. They were afraid that their supplies would now be virtually terminated. Local farmers violently obstructed the collecting and merchandizing activities of the Hamzići. A few hundred farmers first destroyed the newly planted vineyards with their carts, and then set off for Vrata, which they blockaded for some time. This resulted in a mini-war with the armed police. The casualties included some fatalities, and a number of farmers were arrested.

Hatred was rampant, and here too a small incident was enough to set off the fires of revenge. An accident – or perhaps a provocation? – at a small roundabout just under Vrata meant traffic was blocked for some time. So people had no choice but to drive straight through the village. On its way north, a small military convoy of the Croatian army accompanied by one of *Kapetan* Zdravko's guide groups also had to make this detour.<sup>9</sup> The private militia on guard at the homes of rich Muslim villagers were suspicious of the military convoy and ordered the soldiers to retreat. The story goes that this immediately led to an armed skirmish. Residents were dragged from their homes and taken to the mosque, where hand grenades finished the drama. Homes were plundered and partially ravaged, and the brand new wine factory was destroyed in almost ritual fashion. The Rocketeers came back later, hung mines from the lightly constructed building, and then invited everyone from the neighbourhood to shoot at it.

### *St. Jacob's Boys and the return of the Mother of God to Laša Valley*

There are four tiny villages in a row in Laša Valley just above the Neretva River. The largest village, Moski-Karabeg, is the religious centre of the region. Before World War II, there was a mosque there and a large Roman Catholic Mary Chapel that also served as the parish church. Muslims and Catholic Croats were said to have lived there side by side in peace. By the end of World War II, most of the Croats had fled to escape the 'purification' campaigns of the new Partisan government, for Moski-Karabeg was said to have been a fascist Ustaša stronghold. Their land and houses were taken over by Muslim villagers. The few Croats



who remained behind with their pastor Jakov Kvaternik had been able to get along for a while, but in the early sixties they too were driven off by the authorities. (They are said to have been betrayed by their Muslim neighbours, who wanted their land. It seems that during the Ustaša 'purification' campaigns in World War II, Jakov Kvaternik, who was quite a zealot, and several younger priests had been involved in converting Muslims in order to acquire territory and clientele for the excessive numbers of Roman Catholic priests in the region.) In the all-out gunfight that ensued, several young men and pastor Jakov Kvaternik all lost their lives. Some time later the authorities released the men who had been taken prisoner. Some of them went to join relatives in Australia, where they became members of one of the numerous ultra-nationalist Ustaša groups.<sup>10</sup> Others, who were in the same clan as the murdered priest, moved into the nearby Franciscan monastic complex Sveti Brgorac, where Jakov had received part of his training for the priesthood.<sup>11</sup> Jakov, who had been such a fervent nationalist and sworn Ustaša member in his lifetime, soon became an object of veneration. A tiny chapel was built for him on the grounds of the monastery, and a Mass was held there every year on the anniversary of his death, when the men were said to swear to avenge his death.<sup>12</sup>

First, however, the people of Moski-Karabeg were faced with a threat from quite a different direction. It had to do with the age-old struggle for control over the parishes in the region between the Bishop of Mostar and his diocesan priests on the one hand, and the Franciscan friars on the other. In the past few years, with the support of the authorities, the Bishop of Mostar had managed to gain control of several of the Franciscan parishes. By the end of the seventies, it was generally known that the Bishop was negotiating with the authorities about re-Croatizing and thus re-Catholicizing Laša Valley. For the Muslims who lived in Moski-Karabeg, this would mean losing the land they had taken over; for the Franciscans it would mean exclusion from a potential field of action. However, because of the increased terrorist activities of the Croat nationalists, who were traditionally closely linked to the Franciscans of Hercegovina, the government kept postponing its plans.<sup>13</sup> But when these same authorities took flight at the start of the recent war and the law of the jungle reigned once again in the region, the time was ripe for 'double revenge'.

Zdravko Primorac was a regular and esteemed guest at the monastery of Sveti Brgorac. In the course of time, various members of his clan had held important positions there. He is said to have been approached by a delegation of young Franciscans from the monastery – members of the Kvaternik clan which had been driven from Moski-Karabeg – with the request to accompany their families who wanted to return to the land where their fathers were born. The various parties must have reached an agreement, because at the beginning of March 1993, Zdravko and his

Rocketeers raided Moski-Karabeg and slaughtered virtually the entire population. Only a day later, the young priests from Sveti Brgorac planted a Franciscan cross on the smouldering ruins and dedicated the parish to Mary, the Mother of God.

In 1996 I noticed that one of the largest houses in Moski-Karabeg had been turned into a parish house. Next to the entrance, there was a tablet set in the wall to commemorate the village's former priest, the almost sacrosanct Jakov Kvaternik. Six young pastors lived in the house, 'members of St. Jacob's Boys', as an informant with an Australian accent laughingly referred to the former priests cum avengers from Sveti Brgorac.

### **Ethnic demonization and total 'cleansing'**

The Croatian and Bosnian Croat army units that worked together to 'cleanse' Hercegovina and western Bosnia of Serbs in early 1992 then proceeded to the north and east to cross swords with the armies of the Bosnian Serbs.<sup>14</sup> Under pressure of the circumstances, a coalition emerged between the Croat army units and the official Bosnian troops, which soon consisted almost solely of Muslims. It was a shaky coalition that only held up so long as Croats and Serbs were still conquering each other's territory and driving each other off and murdering each other. In these horrific battles, the Serbs also targeted the Muslims, who were just as much their traditional arch enemies as the Croats.<sup>15</sup> This coalition between Croats and Muslims soon came to an end once a point of saturation was reached in the fighting, the outflow of Croat and Muslim refugees expanded, and Croatia, Serbia and the international community all started backing the idea of dividing up the area into ethnically homogeneous territories. Outright fighting soon developed between the armies of these two parties. They each tried to expand their own territory as quickly as they could and ethnically homogenize it. This latest development in the war once again produced an outflow of refugees, most of whom settled in the cities.

This armed conflict, reinforced from above, led in turn to large-scale antagonism between segments of the population that had until recently viewed each other as brother peoples and had mainly supported each other in the wars of the past (Bringa 1995; West 1996). Particularly as regards the Muslims, a dramatic process of demonization, forcefully stimulated by the Croatian government, began to emerge. In their desperate attempts not to be totally overlooked in a two-sided division of Bosnia Hercegovina, they were supported by a number of contingents of *Mujahidin*, veterans from Afghanistan and other countries in the Middle East. As a result of their military demeanour and their plainly missionary activities focused upon establishing a militant and fundamentalist brand of Islam, *all* the Muslims of Bosnia Hercegovina were soon known

as Christ-killers who had to be vanquished at all costs. In their respective regions, religious nationalists, Croats and Serbs alike, contributed to this demonization of the originally rather liberal Bosnian Muslims (Balić 1992; Malcolm 1994; Sells 1996).

In the spring of 1993 a Bosnian Croat army unit was ordered to return from the northern front and establish law and order in the Hercegovinian homeland. This was the start of the last stage of the total 'cleansing' of the region. In this stage as well, however, it was predominantly the local, historical and religious circumstances that shaped the course of the process.

### *Laša Valley cleansing completed*

The young priest Krsto Kvaternik compared life in Moski-Karabeg (renamed Veliko-Kvaternik), now occupied by Croats, to life in an early kibbutz in Israel. The work was done in shifts, and while one shift was rebuilding the houses and planting the gardens, the other one would stand guard. Raids from the three surrounding Muslim villages were a strong possibility, especially since their regional radio station regularly appealed to the Muslims to be vigilant and organize local civilian guards.

For the sake of their own safety, the Franciscan priests of Moski-Karabeg had repeatedly called upon a number of members of their clan who had remained behind on the monastic grounds of Sveti Brgorac. These clan members discussed the situation with the monastic leadership, but they did not want to go without protection in such troubled times. This is why the young priests of Moski-Karabeg went to *Kapetan* Zdravko to discuss the matter with him. He replied that he could not provide any permanent protection, since his 'group of forty men' was not equipped to do so. At a celebration in Grude, the headquarters of the newly proclaimed state of Herceg-Bosna, he had, however, been informed that an army contingent was soon to return to its base in Bobanci near Grude. Zdravko agreed to consult with the commander, whom he knew well.

A mere week and a half later, it was clear to one and all how the request for protection had been interpreted. Late one night, together with Zdravko's Rocketeers, the men from Bobanci raided the three tiny villages in Laša Valley. The meek resistance was quickly dealt with. Before the houses were destroyed with hand grenades, the raiders were able to take whatever they wanted. So in no time, Laša Valley was cleansed, Zdravko had a completely free transit route to the petrol depots of Croatia, and the Franciscan regime could consolidate its position there. A dozen women and a few young children were transported out of the villages. They were to be among the first residents of Dretelj, the notorious killing camp only half an hour's walk from the peace centre of Medjugorje.

*A conference in Assisi and the fall of the wall in Čapljina*

The ever smooth information machine of Rome was receiving an increasing number of reports about the diocese of Mostar being on the verge of collapse. With the help of the newly inaugurated President of Hercegovina, the militant nationalists of the Province of the Franciscan Order of Hercegovina had conveniently taken advantage of the collapse of the old state. In the past, after all, the state had stimulated the diocesanization process of the Mostar bishopric, as a result of which the Franciscans had lost countless parishes (Quaestio 1979; Bax 1995). Now that the tide was turning, their main aim was to try and expand their regime again.

In an effort to promote peace in former Yugoslavia, in January 1993 Pope John Paul II held a conference in Assisi. The special problems in the Mostar diocese were to be discussed beforehand with the parties involved (Assisi 1993). It is hard to say exactly what was discussed, but it is said in Franciscan circles that the Pope threatened to reorganize the Province of the Franciscan Order.<sup>16</sup> However, it does not seem to have helped much. They had to exploit the fact that for the time being, the chances of power were in their favour, or so one of the strategists of the Franciscans informed me. Citing various examples from the history of the region, he pointed out that this was how it had always gone.

Čapljina was one of the largest recent Franciscan reconquests and is one of the larger settlements in the region. With a population of 35,000 the town is strategically situated on the Neretva River at the junction of two large motorways. It was only under extremely severe pressure that the Franciscans had relinquished their basilica in Čapljina in the seventies to the Bishop, who immediately appointed a few of his diocesan priests there. To prevent further problems, the government had a brick wall built in front of the entrance, with police officers almost permanently on guard. Despite this secular supervision, there were regular altercations at the wall between loyal (that is, Franciscan-minded) parishioners and diocesan priests.

The Serbs, who were the largest group in Čapljina, were driven out of the town in the first wave of warfare. However, the tranquility that ensued was short-lived. Para-military activities were going on in the Muslim quarter of the town, and the local Croat militia was suspiciously watching every step. Fighting seems to have broken out between the two parties when the Muslims broke into the local arms depot of the Territorial Defence. Tension developed when outside Muslim elements were observed in the quarter and the Croat regional radio station issued warnings about terrorist groups from the Middle East.

The Croat army division from Bobanci still had a few lines of action in southwest Hercegovina on its agenda.<sup>17</sup> Upon the insistence of the Province of the Franciscan Order, attention was first focused on the large

Catholic community in Čapljina, which was now being 'threatened by fundamentalist forces'. Their 'rescue' took place in June. The Muslims who were taken prisoner were transported to two new camps not far from one of the two Franciscan mother monasteries in the region. The victors crashed a tank violently into the wall in front of the basilica, and from what was left they made a monument headed with the Franciscan cross.

*Stolac cleansed, Hrasno desecrated, Počitelj depopulated; the next to the last round*

After some actions further to the north, the Croat army unit of Bobanci continued its cleansing activities in its own region. Besides the capital of Mostar, there were two small Muslim towns left in this part of Hercegovina, Stolac and Počitelj, both of them centres of old Ottoman culture. There was not much time to waste, because an arms shipment from the Middle East, intercepted in the harbour of Split, made it clear that more help was on the way from there (*Splitska Tjednika*, 18 May 1993).

Stolac, with its four beautiful mosques, was attacked in late August. The inhabitants of the town were taken by surprise, since only a few months earlier the very same Croat army had conquered the town from the Serb occupiers and the soldiers were hailed as liberators (Sells 1996). The people were rounded up like cattle and transported to one of the Croat concentration camps in the region. While the auxiliary troops plundered the houses and blew up all the cultural monuments, *Kapetan Zdravko* led a few military vehicles on to the nearby village of Hrasno (Pasič 1994; Riedlmayer 1994).

To Croat religious nationalists, Hrasno has a very negative ring to it; in fact, they would prefer to deny the whole existence of this special spot. It is the diocesan predecessor and adversary of Medjugorje that was a topic of such heated discussions in local Catholic circles at the time (Kraljica Mira 1978; Quaestio 1979; Oreč 1989). In 1977, two years after the diocese took over Čapljina, the Bishop of Mostar consecrated a shrine in this village of Croat colonists from the north. It was devoted to the Virgin Mary, referred to locally as the Queen of Peace. The devotional centre was formally meant to be a place of prayer for reconciliation in this region, which had been scourged for so long by warfare and hostilities (Perić 1977). But Hrasno also had a strategic significance in the lengthy intra-church animosity. From this shrine situated about twenty-five kilometres south of Čapljina, the last 'domesticated' stronghold in a Catholic sense, the diocese hoped to further expand its regime in Muslim territory through missionary work.<sup>18</sup>

After the Franciscan reconquest of the parish of Čapljina in June 1993, a religious elimination of the diocesan outpost of Hrasno was thus quite logical. My informant in Hercegovina, married to a Dutch woman and actively involved in the matter, gave me the following account: 'It was

our intention to remove the statue of Our Lady on 15 August [which is the feast of Mary's Assumption]. We were not able to reach Hrasno in time, though we did succeed in the month of Mary.' He told me how they had gone there with a group of men from Medjugorje and suspended mines from the tiny shrine after first removing the plaster statue from its pedestal and putting it in the car. 'Hrasno was desecrated,' he concluded. He was not about to tell me where in Medjugorje the statue was now kept.

After this detour, the war machine from Bobanci continued on in the direction of Mostar, where the last scene of the drama was to take place later that year. On the way they bombed Počitelj, the Ottoman museum town on the Neretva River, and transported the population to a prison camp. Not a trace is left of the rich Ottoman tradition. And this indeed was the plan, for Počitelj was to become a Catholic town, as is demonstrated among other things by the erection of an enormous Franciscan cross on the top of the highest hill of the town.<sup>19</sup>

Except for Mostar, the so-called Republic of Herceg-Bosna had been ethnically cleansed by the time of the wine festivities in October 1993. In the summer of 1994, my military informant Tomislav put coloured indicators on a map to show the progress of the ethnic homogenization of Hercegovina. A decade earlier, Father Jozo had used the same method in his Croat-German guest parish to demonstrate to me the course of the battle between the Bishop of Mostar and the Franciscan community of Hercegovina. His indicators were red and black.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

There is a tendency among social scientists and others to interpret the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia Hercegovina as the result of a political policy carefully orchestrated from above and systematically carried out. Whatever eruptions of war violence might deviate from this interpretation are generally viewed as primitive balkanism, age-old tribalism, pointless and absurd violence, the acts of bandits, organized crime, or mental aberrations (e.g. Balič 1992; Denitch 1994; Donia and Fine 1994; Malcolm 1994, 1997; Cigar 1995, 1996; Geiss and Intemann 1995; Sorabji 1995; Meštrovič 1996; Sells 1996; Silber and Little 1996; West, 1996). Terms of this kind reflect an uncritical acceptance of a central or national leader perspective, dismissing as deviant everything that does not go according to plan and denying the significance of specific local and regional circumstances or at any rate failing to problematize and examine them.

This article has described a process the final result of which can be seen as the ethnic homogenization of a region, but only part of its dynamics can be attributed to a policy implemented from above. It is nevertheless difficult to maintain that the process was the outcome of primitive balkanism, age-old tribalism, pointless and absurd violence, or

mental aberrations. On the contrary, its course can be traced back to vendettas between local communities or sections of them that might well have been carefully planned but were not ethnically founded, and that were often carried out on the same lines as the long-standing conflicts between Franciscan friars and diocesan priests.

This case illustrates that a systematic study from below is crucial to a better understanding of the dynamics and the developmental logic of processes of ethnic cleansing. Rather than being political oppositions, in the social sciences 'from above' and 'from below' are interrelated and consequently supplementary perspectives on how people live together.

The same line of reasoning is adopted concerning the involvement of clergymen in the violence of war. To the extent that authors refer to it at all, the conduct of the Franciscan priests in Hercegovina is almost invariably condemned in the most negative of terms. These clergymen, it is argued, behave in such an 'abnormal', 'hypocritical', 'primitive' and 'cruel and savage manner' (Vojinovit 1991; Schenk 1993; Mojzes 1994; West 1996; Meštrovič 1996; Sells 1996) that they can barely be considered Christian leaders. Here again, a perspective from above (the perspective of the Vatican, of Christianity, of 'how it ought to be') is adopted in order to arrive at a diagnosis. Everything that is not in keeping with it is dismissed as being an aberration. However, this clearly prevents us from gaining greater insight into the reasons underlying the conduct in question.

In this connection, Norbert Elias wrote the following paradigmatic words: 'Religion is always exactly as civilized as the social layer that bears it' (quoted in Goudsblom 1987, p. 49). Elias thus noted the need to go beyond the ideal, the norm, the perspective of the leaders, and to focus on the social conditions that make the Franciscan involvement in the war violence easier to comprehend. For centuries, the Franciscan friars of Hercegovina have been the indigenous leaders of a society of peasants and shepherds dominated by powers they perceived as their enemies. First the Ottomans, then the Habsburgs, and when Tito was in power, the Croat Catholic population was dominated by Serbs. In all these cases, the local population felt it had no choice but to take the law into its own hands (Bax 1995). In periods of relative political tranquility, this tendency did not get out of hand. The Franciscans were mainly religious leaders who concentrated on the rites and rituals of the Church and on settling disputes among the faithful. In that case, pacifying or civilizing activities were the dominant mode (Bax 1996). The Franciscans had also long dominated the educational system, thus almost monopolizing the major means of orientation. However, when the state monopoly on organized violence weakened, or disappeared altogether, as was quite frequently the case in this region, the religious leaders also became the secular leaders of their people. Owing to their extensive monastic communication networks, they were able to mobilize the adult men and

organize them into 'violence' formations in which they themselves sometimes occupied a 'military' position. The HOS, the first military formation fighting the Serb-dominated federal army, was mobilized and largely steered by Hercegovinian Franciscans. Through their international networks, these 'warrior priests' (Goudsblom 1988) also played an active role in supplying arms. (This aspect of the Franciscan leadership makes it easier to understand why monasteries and other religious centres were so high on the Serb destruction lists.)

It is customary in the Western world of Christianity to view 'faith' and 'violence' as mutually exclusive and incompatible concepts. This prejudice – because in essence that is all it is – has to do with a far-reaching division between what might be called secular and religious formations or regimes (Bax 1991, in progress; Spier 1994; 1996). It is a division that might now well be characteristic of contemporary Western state societies, but one which only came into existence by way of a gradual process over the course of many centuries. This division is also characterized by an advanced level of civilization on the part of both regimes. In parts of Bosnia Hercegovina not only has this division between the two regimes not (yet?) been established in a permanent and comprehensive manner, but also – and related to this – their respective civilizing processes are rather capricious. For in the course of their development, they have both exhibited a tendency towards civilization as well as decivilization. So, just like state regimes, religious regimes are characterized by both civilizing and decivilizing processes or tendencies. Examining the inter-relatedness of these processes between and within religious and state regimes can enhance our understanding and help to prevent simplistic labelling.

The case described above gives rise to a few comments about an important aspect of Elias's civilizing theory, that is, the dynamics of mutual identification processes. In general terms, his line of reasoning is that civilizing processes are characterized in part by an expansion of the range of mutual identification. In Stephen Mennell's words, '... the growth of the sense that other people, whom one does not necessarily know personally, are probably rather similar to oneself, with similar feelings and likely to behave in a similar way' (Mennell 1989b, p. 106). Elias did not develop an explicit theory of decivilizing processes, though others, who largely followed in his footsteps, did make efforts to do so. In particular, Mennell, and then Fletcher, devoted systematic attention to the formulation of a theory of decivilization (Mennell 1989a; 1989b; 1990; 1995a; 1995b; Fletcher 1995, 1997). One of the central points in their discourses is that the fragmentation of the state monopoly on the organized means of violence coincides with the reduction of the range of mutual identification. Although this line of reasoning would generally seem to be accurate enough, its empirical application is not such a simple matter. In the region of Hercegovina described above, the locally oriented identification ('we villagers, Muslims and Croats alike, against the



evil outsiders and against other villages') is decreasing and the ethnically and regionally oriented identification is increasing.

Tone Bringa observed a virtually identical development, though unfortunately no more than that, in a very different region in Bosnia Hercegovina. There too, the mutual local identification of Muslims and Croats is crumbling under the influence of the violence of war and the regional identification along ethnic lines is on the rise (Bringa 1993; 1995). In neither of these cases is there any evidence of the kind of unambiguous reduction in cognitive interdependencies accompanying the rising level of danger, as is stipulated in the decivilization model. The conclusion would seem to be justified that processes of identification and de-identification should be studied in combination (Wilterdink 1993; De Swaan 1997), and always in a clearly defined empirical context. What is viewed and perceived as de-identification at the local level emerges at a higher level of society as a reinforced or more conscious form of identification. In this perspective, the war in Bosnia Hercegovina, no matter how horrific it might be, can also be viewed as a decivilizing *spurt* (the term is Elias's) that is to contribute in the course of time to further civilization in the Balkan region. No matter how absurd this notion of war as an integration mechanism might seem in the first instance, it none the less deserves further theoretical thought and empirical examination.

## **Acknowledgements**

This article is based on documents and fieldwork that I conducted with interruptions from 1984 to 1999. The names of all the people and of some of the places have been changed. I would like to thank my informants in Bosnia Hercegovina and elsewhere in Europe for their help, protection and hospitality. For suggestions and critical comments on an earlier version I am indebted to Peter Kloos, Daan Meijers, Fred Spier, the participants of the Promotie-werkplaats, two anonymous reviewers, and the editors of this journal.

## **Notes**

1. For more information about this first wave of violence see Donia and Fine 1994; Geiss and Intermann 1995; Denitch 1996; Meštrović 1996; Silber and Little 1996; West 1996.
2. Further information about this contention within the Church is given later in this article. See also Quaestio 1979; Ramet 1985; Bax 1995.
3. After World War II, President Tito's regime of Partisans launched a large-scale purge against anyone who had been on the 'wrong' side. In fact, this purge lasted into the sixties and the region hardest hit by it was Hercegovina. In World War II, it had been part of the Independent State of Croatia [NDH], an ultra-fascist and religious nationalistic state headed by the extremely cruel Ustaša movement. Many of the Croat Hercegovinians had to pay the penalty for the systematic slaughter of so many Serb inhabitants of the region, in which Franciscans priests played a prominent role. Many of them were executed, others were sent to prison camps, but most of them seem to have escaped, with church officials in

Rome playing an instrumental role in the process. In Argentina, Bolivia, Scandinavia, Germany, Spain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, these fervent religious nationalists set up new violent movements under various names. In the seventies, they were regularly active in former Yugoslavia. And when the recent wars broke out in Croatia and Bosnia Hercegovina, large numbers of them returned to serve as the spearheads of any number of action groups. For more information about these ultra-nationalists, see Alexander 1979, 1987; Wilson 1979; Coxsedg *et al.* 1989; Butler 1990; West 1996.

4. The Franciscans in this part of Hercegovina have two main monasteries at Hum and Sveti Brgorac. Every year a number of priests would graduate from the seminaries of these monasteries and be appointed to parishes in the region or to the numerous Croat communities elsewhere in Europe and overseas. Large numbers of lay people also received and still receive their general education there: virtually all the Croat intellectuals, influential politicians and statesmen of the region were educated there. The monasteries are not only fertile ground for Hercegovinian culture, they are also well known as hotbeds of extreme religious nationalism. The monastic communities worked in close cooperation with the Ustaša movement, which was at the core of the regime of the NDH in World War II. These monasteries and the Franciscans there also played an important role in the region in the most recent war in Bosnia Hercegovina, as is amply illustrated later in this article. A great deal has been written about the role and the significance of the Franciscans of Hercegovina during and after World War II (see, for example, Novak 1948; Paris 1961; Hory and Broszat 1964; Falconi 1970; Jelič 1978; Tomasevich 1978; Alexander 1979; Jelič-Butič 1983, 1986; Alexander 1979, 1987; Broucek 1988; Butler 1990; Steinberg 1990; Aarons and Loftus 1991; A. Djilas 1991; Schenk 1993; Denitch 1996; Sells 1996; West 1996). Barely any publications have appeared yet about their involvement in the recent war.

5. There were five of these Marian Chapels, one in each hamlet of the parish of Medjugorje. They were meant for the ritual meetings of the people who lived in the neighbourhood. The large parish church had virtually become the realm of the pilgrims, who held services there hour after hour, each time in a different language. In the hamlet of Bijakovič, services were also held for the 'defenders of the community'. Not far from this consecrated spot, up until recently there had also been a mass grave from World War II, where the local Ustaša division had slaughtered Serb villagers and thrown them into a ravine (Vojinovit 1991; Bax 1997).

6. By the middle of 1992, the former federal Yugoslav state of Bosnia Hercegovina consisted of three 'states': 1) the Croat Community of Herceg-Bosna supported by Croatia, 2) the Serb Republic of Bosnia Hercegovina consisting of Bosnian Serbs and supported by Serbia, and 3) the state of Bosnia Hercegovina mainly populated by Muslims and recognized by the West. None of these formations was territorially stable and ethnically completely homogeneous.

7. This Catholic Croat Ustaša state [NDH] was supported by Germany and Italy and contained present-day Croatia and Bosnia Hercegovina. The policy of the state was primarily focused upon ethnic cleansing: all the Serbs who lived inside the borders of the state had to be converted or driven off or murdered. Many Franciscans were actively involved in the cleansing and forced conversions (see also note 4). The Muslims were not the target of systematic persecution; they were generally viewed as Croats who had not yet found Christianity and many of them had indeed fought on the Croat side. Much of the present-day animosity between Serbs and Croats can be traced back to the period of more than four years from 1941 to 1945 when the two groups were murdering each other (Tomasevich 1969, 1975, 1978; Križman 1980, 1983).

8. It is generally known that the leaders of the 'state' of Herceg-Bosna, which formally ceased to exist in 1995, were on extremely close and friendly terms with the heads of the Province of the Franciscan Order in the region (Vulliamy 1994; Sells 1996; West 1996).

9. In addition to being commissioned to settle certain matters, for an exorbitant fee Zdravko and his Rocketeers could also be hired to accompany regular army units and

humanitarian convoys through alien territory. These para-military and quasi-military activities were a traditional source of income for the people in this region (Soldo 1964; Koljević 1980; Vego 1981; , Balić 1992; Donia and Fine 1994; Denitch 1996).

10. See note 3.

11. It was common practice at the time for Franciscan novices of the mother monasteries at Hum and Sveti Brgorac to receive part of their training for the priesthood in Italy at Assisi, and their physical and political training at one of the various Ustaša camps in the region, of which Siena was the most well known (Broucek 1988; Sells 1996; West 1996).

12. I attended this commemoration several times, but for a while without knowing the whys and wherefores.

13. Ample information about these terrorist activities can be found in Križman 1986; Cocksedge 1989; Aarons and Loftus 1991.

14. The following section summarizes a familiar picture of the penultimate stage in the war in the west of Bosnia Hercegovina. Extensive but rather superficial accounts of it can be found in Donia and Fine 1994; Denitch 1996; Meštrović 1996; Sells 1996; Silber and Little 1996.

15. Until then, Croats and Muslims were locally and officially referred to and viewed as 'brother peoples' (Sells 1996). Muslims in Eastern Bosnia were the Serbs' main targets. The war dynamics between the three ethnic groups was thus influenced by the politics of geography as well as of demography.

16. The reorganization was indeed carried out, and since 1995 the Province of the Franciscan Order has been under the direct supervision of Rome. The friction between the Bishop of Mostar and the Franciscans of Hercegovina had already been close to breaking-point. The ownership of the parish of Čapljina was one of the greatest points of dissension, and the friction was also heightened by the other recent Franciscan reconquests and the destruction that took place in Hrasno, which will be referred to in greater detail later in the article. Various pro-Franciscan military, para-military and political leaders in Herceg-Bosna and Croatia also played a role in the conflicts. They threatened, for example, to blow up the Cathedral of Mostar the building of which had only recently been finished (Nuhanović 1995; Silber and Little 1996). These militant individuals did indeed carry out the threat, and in 1995 the cathedral was blown up. As a monumental memorial, a few large chunks of the twisted metal of the rooftop are now in the monastery garden of Sveti Brgorac at the foot of the large statue of St Francis. A sign next to them states: 'Remains of the rooftop of the Cathedral of Mostar'. This trophy is said to have been presented to the monastery by a few militia men from the region.

17. The following information is based upon conversations with several leading Franciscans and an ex-officer who played a role in the actions.

18. As regards the significance of shrines in this part of the Balkan as instruments of expansion, see Bax 1989; Duijzings 1991.

19. The leaders of Herceg-Bosna renamed the town Komušin. More information on the policy of totally destroying the past carried out by Serbs and Croats alike in the territory that they conquered can be found in Pašić 1994; Riedlmayer 1994.

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